DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 249 454 CG 017 774

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TITLE Sex Differences in Student Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors: A Ten Year Comparison. Research Report 7-83.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; Behavior Standards; Cohort Analysis; *College Freshmen; Higher Education; *Sex Differences; *Sexuality; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS University of Maryland College Park

ABSTRACT

There is a need for systematic comparisons and replications of research on questions concerning students' sexual behaviors and attitudes. To examine whether or not students' attitudes and behaviors toward sex and sex-related issues changed over a decade, 435 incoming freshmen in 1973 and 460 freshmen in 1983 were administered an anonymous questionnaire assessing their sexual behaviors and attitudes. Seven major patterns of results were found. These included: (1) an increase in rates of premarital intercourse; (2) a decrease in sex differences in rates of intercourse, with this decrease primarily reflecting increased rates among females; (3) no change in students' personal and sexual codes; (4) a movement toward a more conservative standard for female sexual behavior; (5) a tendency for less awareness of campus resources; (6) a more conservative view of abortion in 1983; and (7) fewer students viewing homosexuality as an illness in 1983, accompanied by less willingness to disclose one's own homosexual preferences. The findings indicate that sexual identity is an important developmental issue for college students. (BL)

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CG 017774

This study was done in cooperation with the Orientation Office, Gerry Strumpf, Director.

Computer time for this project has been provided in full through the Computer Science Center of the University of Maryland.

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Summary

435 incoming freshmen in 1973 and 460 freshmen in 1983 were administered an anonymous questionnaire assessing their sexual behaviors and attitudes.

Behavioral differences were found only in patterns of premarital intercourse, with the 1983 group reporting higher rates and frequency of intercourse than the 1973 students. There was also a decrease in sex differences in rates of intercourse, with this decrease primarily reflecting increased rates among females. No differences between the groups were found in rates of abortion or homosexual experiences.

Students in 1983 held more conservative attitudes toward abortion than students in 1973, believing that abortions should not be made available to students without parental consent. In addition, while more students in 1983 believed they would not let anyone know if they were a homosexual, students in 1973 were more likely to believe that homosexuals need psychological or medical help.

There was no change in students' personal sexual codes, with many students believing in intercourse before marriage only with someone they were deeply involved with emotionally. More females than males in both years agreed that a deep emotional commitment to one's partner was necessary prior to engaging in intercourse. Additionally, the groups did not differ in their standards for males, but the 1983 group did hold a more conservative sexual code for females than the 1973 group.

Freshmen in 1983 were less aware of the availability of special campus resources than the 1973 students. There were no sex differences in either year in terms of awareness of resource availability.

During the past two decades, there has been considerable research interest in the sexual behaviors and attitudes of male and female college students. Descriptive data have accumulated since the mid-1960's, revealing a general trend toward increased levels of premarital sexual intercourse for both males and females (King & Sobel, 1975; McBride & Ender, 1977; Nutt & Sedlacek, 1974; Robinson & Jedlicka, 1982). Robinson and Jedlicka (1982) conducted three five-year replications of an original 1965 study on students' sexual behaviors and attitudes. They found that for males, rates of premarital intercourse rose from 65 percent in 1965 to 77 percent in 1980. A larger increase was found for females, with rates rising from 29 percent in 1965 to 64 percent in 1980. With the exception of this study, however, few attempts have been made to replicate findings at the same institution. Hence, it is difficult to compare results across studies and trends must be interpreted with caution. Additionally, the research focuses on sexual behaviors, ignoring important sex-related and societal issues such as rates of abortion and attitudes toward homosexuality.

Several studies have also examined concommitant trends in attitudes toward sex. Most of the research has concerned standards for premarital sexual behavior. Nutt and Sedlacek (1974) and McBride and Ender (1977) found high degrees of congruence between behaviors and attitudes. However, a more recent study revealed that while levels of sexual behavior had not changed, the attitudes of both males and females toward sexual morality had become more conservative (Robinson & Jedlicka 1982). Finally, while it appears that sex differences in behaviors and attitudes are decreasing (Bauman & Wilson, 1976; Robinson & Jedlicka, 1982), males still seem to endorse more liberal attitudes toward premarital sexual behavior (Bender, 1973; McBride & Ender, 1977; Nutt & Sedlacek, 1974). As with the behavioral research, the literature on attitudes lacks systematic research and tends to focus on only one attitudinal dimension: premarital sexual standards.

In general, questions concerning students' behaviors and attitudes toward such issues as homosexuality, abortion and health services still need to be explored. In addition, there is an important need for systematic comparisons and replications in order to reliably document changes that may occur on these variables over time. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine whether students' attitudes and behaviors toward sex and sex-related issues have changed over a decade while controlling for such dimensions as institutional affiliation, population, and instrumentation. In addition, changes in sex differences over time will be explored.

Method

Representative samples of incoming freshmen students at the University of Maryland, College Park, were administered an anonymous questionnaire in 1973 (N=435: Males-211; Females-244) and 1983 (N=460: Males-261; Females-199). Mean ages of the groups were 17.6 and 17.8 in 1973 and 1983, respectively. Data were analyzed using Chi square at the .05 level of significance.

Results

Year Differences

Behavior

Seven items assessed students' reports of sex-related behavior. As Table 1-A indicates, significant differences between the 1973 and 1983 samples were found on two of these items. More students in 1983 than in 1973 reported having engaged in intercourse (63% vs. 55%) and having had intercourse at least once a month during the previous year (27% vs. 17%). In both years, few students reported having had intercourse with only one person (1973: 21%; 1983: 25%). While the incidence of abortion was low in both years (1973: 3%; 1983: 4%), a larger proportion of students indicated that they knew someone who had had an abortion during the previous year (1973: 48%; 1983: 47%). Finally,

only 3% of the 1973 sample and 2% of the 1983 group reported having been involved in at least one homosexual experience during the previous year.

Attitudes

Table 1B lists the responses of the students on the eleven items assessing attitudes toward a variety of sex-related issues. Significantly more students in 1973 than 1983 were aware of campus resources for: contraceptive information and prescriptions (97% vs. 91%); information and treatment for V.D. (97% vs. 88%); and information and aid in seeking abortions (90% vs. 75%). The items measuring attitudes toward homosexuality revealed mixed results. While significantly more students in 1983 believed they would not let anyone know if they were a homosexual (70% vs. 61%), more students in 1973 believed that homosexuals need psychological or medical help (53% vs. 45%). In both years, 26% of the students reported personally knowing one or more homosexuals, and there was no difference in the proportion of students believing that there are many homosexuals on campus (1973: 37%; 1983: 31%). Significantly fewer students in 1983 than in 1973 believed that abortions should be available to students without parental consent (61% vs. 74%), or that masturbation is a normal sexual outlet (58% vs. 72%). Finally, 14% of both groups believed that students who do not have premarital intercourse are considered strange.

Premarital Sexual Standards

Table 2 indicated students' premarital sexual standards for themselves, for males and for females. The two groups did not differ in terms of their personal sexual code by year, with most students believing in intercourse before marriage (1973: 70%; 1983: 77%). Many students believed they would engage in premarital intercourse only with someone they were deeply involved with emotionally (1973: 40%; 1983: 45%). There were also no differences in students' ideal code for males, with many believing that males should engage in premarital intercourse only with someone they were emotionally involved with (1973: 36%; 1983: 40%).

The groups differed significantly in their ideal code for females, however, with more students in 1983 believing that females should engage in sex only with someone they were involved with emotionally (52% vs. 42%). Generally, students in 1973 held a more liberal sexual code for females than students in 1983. The groups also differed in their perceptions of the codes held by the typical male and female students. More students in 1983 than 1973 believed that both males (85% vs. 76%) and females (53% vs. 44%) engage in intercourse with someone they are either fond of or mutually attracted to.

Sex Differences

In both years, sex differences were found on several behavioral and attitude items. Significantly more males than females in both years believed that: 1) having contraceptives available on campus increases promiscuity (1973: 46% vs. 34%; 1983: 41% vs. 28%); 2) students who don't have premarital intercourse are considered strange (1973: 21% vs. 7%; 1983: 19% vs. 8%); and 3) they would not let anyone know if they were a homosexual (1973: 71% vs. 51%; 1983: 75% vs. 64%). On the other hand, more females than males reported knowing at least one homosexual (1973: 34% vs. 18%; 1983: 30% vs. 22%) and someone who had an abortion during the previous year (1973: 58% vs. 38%; 1983: 61% vs. 35%). On two items, sex differences were found in 1973 but not in 1983, while on one item, the reverse was true. In 1973, more males than females reported having had intercourse (60% vs. 50%), and more females than males believed that masturbation is a normal sexual outlet (77% vs. 67%). No such sex differences were found in rates of intercourse or attitudes toward masturbation in 1983. On the other hand, in 1983, more males than females believed that homosexuals need psychological or medical help (54% vs. 35%), while no sex difference was found in 1973 on this item.

Sex differences were also found in students' standards for premarital sexual intercourse (see Table 2). In both years, significantly more males than females believed in sexual intercourse for themselves with a fond or mutual sex attraction

(1973: 49% vs. 13%; 1983: 47% vs. 13%). However, females were more likely to believe in premarital intercourse only with a deep emotional involvement with one's partner (1973: 49% vs. 30%; 1983: 57% vs. 37%). The same pattern of results was found for students' ideal code for male and female sexual behavior. Finally, in both years, female students felt that more males (1973: 86%; 1983: 89%) than females (1973: 44%; 1983: 56%) engage in intercourse through fondness and/or mutual sex attraction.

Discussion

The results of this ten-year comparison show that while there were some similarities between students of the 1980's and the 1970's in regard to sexual behaviors and attitudes, the two groups also differed in many respects. Behavioral differences were found only in patterns of premarital intercourse, with the 1983 group reporting higher rates and frequency of intercourse than the 1973 sample. The data suggest that the difference between the two groups may have been due to the increased proportion of females engaging in intercourse. In 1973, significantly more males than females engaged in premarital intercourse, while in 1983, no sex difference was found. In addition, the proportion of students having premarital intercourse in 1983 was quite similar to the rates found in other studies (King & Sobel, 1975; McBride & Ender, 1977; Robinson & Jedlicka, 1982). As mentioned previously, no other behavioral differences were found. However, while differences in abortion rates were not signficant, it is interesting to note that these rates did double between 1973 and 1983. Whether or not this represents a <u>future</u> trend is still uncertain at this point.

There were no changes in students' personal standards for sexual behavior and intercourse. Many students in both years believed that a deep emotional commitment to one's partner was necessary prior to engaging in intercourse. However, more females than males believed this to be true in both 1973 and 1983,

while more males believed in intercourse through fondness or a mutual sex attraction in both years. The groups did not differ in their standards for males, but the 1983 group did hold a more conservative sexual code for females than the 1973 sample. Further analyses revealed that female students in both years held a more conservative ideal sexual code for both males and females. In general then, two interesting patterns of results were revealed: 1) while sex differences in actual behaviors have decreased over the ten years, sex differences still exist in terms of students' standards for their own and others' sexual behavior; 2) while more females in 1983 than 1973 reported having had intercourse, the 1983 group held a more conservative code for female behavior. This was especially true for the females themselves.

Students entering the university in 1983 seemed to be less aware of the availability of special campus resources (i.e., contraceptive information and prescriptions, information and treatment for V.D., and information and aid in seeking abortions) than the 1973 freshmen. There were no sex differences in either year in terms of awareness of resource availability. It is important to point out, however, that while the 1983 students were less aware of resources in a relative sense, the absolute proportion of students who did know of these services in 1983 was still quite high (i.e., ranging from 75% to 91% for the three resources mentioned above). Since both groups consisted of entering freshmen who were likely not to have any prior experience on campus, it is difficult to speculate on the reasons for this relative lack of awareness in recent years. In addition, it is uncertain whether this trend will continue in the future.

Students' attitudes toward several sex-related social issues revealed mixed results. The 1983 group held a more conservative view of abortion than students in 1973, believing that abortions should not be made available to students without parental consent. However, students' attitudes toward homosexuality were less clear. For example, more students in 1983 than 1973 believed they would

be careful not to let anyone know if they were homosexual. Rather than reflecting the students' personal attitudes toward homosexuality, however, the students may have simply been responding to a greater social stigma toward homosexuality in recent years. Additionally, this stigma may be more salient for males, since in both years, more males than females believed they would not let anyone know if they were homosexual. In contrast, fewer students in 1983 believed that homosexuals need psychological or medical help. While no sex differences were found in 1973, more males than females in 1983 viewed homosexuality as a sickness. This reflected the decreased tendency of females in particular to view homosexuality as an illness.

In summary, seven major patterns of results were found. These included: 1) an increase in rates of premarital intercourse; 2) a decrease in sex difference in rates of intercourse, with this decrease primarily reflecting increased rates among females; 3) no change in students' personal sexual codes; 4) a movement toward a more conservative standard for female sexual behavior; 5) a tendency for less awareness of campus resources; 6) a more conservative view of abortion in 1983; and 7) fewer students viewed homosexuality as an illness in 1983, accompanied by less willingness to disclose one's own homosexual preferences.

The study highlights two important directions for future research. First, sexual development and identity are salient issues for college students and as a result, sexual attitudes and behaviors are likely to change as students confront and evaluate personal values. Therefore, a longitudinal study of incoming freshmen may provide information on how and in what ways these attitudes and behaviors develop during the college years. In addition, the results of this study revealed several interesting, but nonsignificant differences between the 1973 and 1983 students. For instance, it was previously mentioned that while differences in abortion rates were not significant, these rates did double over

the ten-year period. In such instances, additional replications could provide valuable insight into the consistency of the direction of changes in students.

Implications

The results of this study have several important implications for programming efforts within student affairs. In particular, the information on sexual attitudes and behaviors is relevant to both counselors and student health center staff members. First, this study indicated that discrepencies exist between students' sexual behaviors and attitudes. Therefore, as sexual identity is an extremely important developmental issue for students, the results of this study can be used by counselors in order to understand some of the sexual conflicts experienced by students.

Second, the results also have important implications for student health centers. For instance, this study revealed a trend toward decreased awareness of several health-related resources available on campus. In addition, attitudes toward sexual behavior and abortion may, in turn, influence students' perspectives on the usefulness of these health services. The results of this study can, therefore, be used to revise existing services so that they better match the needs of college students in the 1980's. Additionally, it may prove worthwhile to renew efforts at disseminating information on the nature of various health services and educational programs in order to promote awareness as well as utilization of these resources.

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Table 1A

Percent Agreement with Behavioral Items 1973-1983

	Percent Agreement 1973	1983
1. I have had intercourse at least once a month during the last 12 months.	17*	27*
2. (Females) I have had an abortion during the last 12 months.	3	6
3. (Males) I have been sexually involved with someone who had an abortion in the last 12 months.	6	5
4. I have had at least one homosexual experience during the last year.	3	2
5. I never have had intercourse.	45*	37*
6. I know someone who had an abortion during the last year.	48	47
7. I have had intercourse with one person only.	21	25

Table 1B

Percent Agreement with Attitude Items 1973-1983

	Percent Agreement 1973	1983
1. Contraceptive information & prescriptions are available on campus.	97*	91*
2. Information & treatment for V.D. is available on campus.	97*	88*
3. Information & aid in seeking abortion is available on campus.	90*	75*
4. There are a lot of homosexuals at U. Md.	37	31
5. Having contraceptives available increases promiscuity.	40	35
6. Abortions should be readily available to students without parental consent.	74*	61*
7. I personally know one or more homosexuals.	26	26
8. Masturbation is a normal sexual outlet.	72*	58*
9. I think homosexuals need psychological or medical help.	53*	45*
10. Students who do not have sexual intercourse before marriage are considered strange.	14	14
11. If I were a homosexual, I would be careful not to let anyone know.	61*	70*

* significance at .05 using Chi square

Table 2

Percent of Males and Females By Year
Endorsing Sexual Codes for Self, Males, and Females

	1973			1983		
	Male	Female	All 1973	Male	Female	All 1983
Personal Code*						
1	3	6	4	3	7	5
2	18	33	26	14	24	18
3	30	49	40	37	57	45
4	33	12	22	33	10	23
5	16	1	8	14	2	9
Ideal Code for Males*						
1	3	4	4	5	5	5
2	18	24	21	15	18	17
3	31	40	36	31	51	40
4	30	22	26	29	17	24
5	17	10	13	21	9	16
Ideal Code for Females**						
1	5	5	5	6	7	6
2	22	30	26	19	23	21
3	37	47	42	48	57	52
4	25	15	20	18	11	15
5	11	4	7	10	2	6
Perception of Male Behavior**						
1	1	0	1	1	1	1
2	9	3	6	2	3	2
3	26	11	18	15	6	11
4	36	41	39	44	35	40
5	30	45	38	39	55	45
Perception of Female Behavior**						
1	2	1	1	2	0	1
2	10	8	9	4	7	5
3	43	48	46	44	37	41
4	34	38	36	37	47	42
5	11	7	9	14	9	12

Key to Sexual Codes

1 - I do not believe in sexual intimacy, intercourse or anything close to it before marriage.
2 - I believe in some sexual intimacy, but not intercourse, before marriage.
3 - I believe in sexual intercourse before marriage only with someone I am deeply involved with emotionally.
4 - I believe in sexual intercourse with people I am fond of and to whom I am sexually attracted.
5 - I believe in sexual intercourse whenever there is a mutual sex attraction.

* significant differences between years at .05 using Chi square
** significant differences between years and within years by sex (except 1973 perception of female behavior) at .05 using Chi square